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ABSTRACT

Few descriptions of the graduate school experience are taken from the viewpint of the graduate student. The comments and real life experiences presented in this paper are not intended to dissuade potential students but to promote a serious discussion about the role and expectation of the graduate student. The paper opens by sharing thoughts on what two academicians who have been through the system expected of graduate school. One of the two returned to school after 5 years of teaching high school expecting to gain a degree and start a new career. The other returned expecting to be treated like an adult student responsible for his own learning but guided by teachers and looking forward to an experience of intellectual community. The middle section of the paper describes what the two students actually found. The positive aspects were friendships with other students and the chance to focus on learning. A negative aspect of the experience was the realization that graduate students are expected to enter into an "indentured-servant" contract with an advisor. A final section offers recommendations for students and teachers. It is suggested that students select a dissertation topic early and stick with it, that they select each course with an eye to its contribution to the thesis subject, that they network early in their career, and that they publish if at all possible. The advice for faculty offered in this paper emphasizes how central a good advisor is to the graduate experience. (Contains 6 references.) (JB)

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Personal Observation on the Graduate School Experience

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Abstract

The graduate school experience has been described in many variations, often providing listings of strengths and weaknesses by discipline or by international comparison. Most descriptions of the graduate school experience, however, are not taken from the viewpoint of the graduate student. The comments and real life experiences presented here are not intended to dissuade potential students, but are presented to promote a serious discussion about the role and expectation of the graduate school student. While the tone of this address may be light, the recommendations provided are serious and warrant attention by all graduate faculty and students. The intention of the address is to begin a dialogue among interested parties on the severity and improvement of the climate and culture in graduate education in America.

Introduction

The United States Department of Education reported that in 1991 there were 1.6 million graduate students studying in American universities (United States Department of Education, 1993). For a brief period of time, around the late 1980's, we were included in that fatality listing.

The graduate school experience in the United States is unique in many respects, ranging from interaction with faculty to student involvement and outcomes based performance measures. More and more, graduate programs are becoming a testing ground for the validity of the institution. For those of us who have gone through the testing ground, being from Nebraska, we are reminded of the March cattle markets. The testing ground is one of fortitude building, intended to be a cognitive experience as much as a physical setting or chronological journey. What we have found, however, is that the graduate school experience is also a question of endurance, flexibility, reflection, and decision making.

In the quickening of the graduate school experience lies the advisor, an intended mentor, to aid and guide on the path of the knowledge quest. Perhaps one of the clearest explanations of what the relationship between advisor and student, or hopefully the mentor and protege, is and can be has been provided by Moore (1985) in the description of medieval craft guilds. Moore defined mentoring as the informal as well as formal relationship which develops between the 'mentor' and 'protege,' and that this

relationship is paramount to the survival of the graduate student. From our experiences, this may, or may not be the case. Many graduate faculty members, perceived as Norman Rockwell painting prove once and for all that we, the once down-trodden graduate students with hand-me-down clothing, studio apartments, and late-model, Bond-O colored vehicles, have no idea what to expect.

As we prepared our comments for this evening, we reflected on the popular notion of what graduate education is, can be, and should be. Our sub-conscience provided the first steps toward the realization of this address. Our thoughts and words grew intermingled with popular-culture and the often confusing world of Hollywood. Awakening, seemingly in a trance, we dodged David Ogden Steirs attempted tackle to win the favor of Mariel Hemingway. Were these thoughts of autumn afternoons full of comradre real? No. They represent the world we sought out in attending graduate school. The world of Harry Wolper, the credit generator,teacher of the Big Picture,and the grant writer who epitomized all we looked for in graduate school. The references to <u>The Creator</u> may seem childish, even rudimentary to such an enlightened audience, yet we can find no better crystallization of what has become of this "wonderland."

For your sake, as well as ours, we would like to begin by sharing with you some of our experiences in framing the graduate school experience. First, we would like to share some of our thoughts on what we expected, then what we experienced. To

conclude our address, we offer a few suggestions for both those who teach our seekers of the Holy Grail emblazoned with "PhD," and those who are considering the GRE, but still have an opportunity to turn-tail, go on vacation, and retain their self-dignity, respect, and guidance.

CASE #1: Why I Returned To School

Teaching Agricultural Education and Introduction to Physics and Chemistry in a secondary high school for five years demanded a great deal of time, energy, and commitment. Anyone who can establish a profession of teaching high school students is either trapped, or insane, or must be driven by a sincere interest in the noble calling of "education of our youth." I have a deep appreciation for anyone who spends his or her entire career in the education profession for the last reason.

When hired in the school system, I agreed to commit five years or more of my life to the school district, or until the administration thought otherwise of my intentions. Five years was my minimal goal in planning, implementing, and evaluating what I perceived to be an effective and efficient agricultural education program. I came to a stage in my career which was best described by Henry David Thoreau as a plateau of unchallenged purpose.

> Most men would feel insulted if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now.

This plateau was realized in the winter of 1986, so in the summer of 1987, I returned to the place which bore me as an undergraduate. Returning "home" seemed simple, but my, how things never change.

Never in my wildest dreams would I ever consider accepting a 50% cut in salary to return to graduate school to earn another degree. Why leave a place where I was comfortable? Stable? Valued? And, a place where I was appreciated? But reflecting on my nigh school teaching experience, I said to myself - "there must be something more in life." A career or profession I have yet to discover. A purpose far greater than any individual objective. A risk worth taking. Little did I know there was a box on my head and all the answer were listed on the outside. Why wouldn't anyone tell me the answers?

CASE #2: Why I Returned To School

After graduating from college, I went immediately to work for my alma mater's foundation as an assistant director in the annual giving division. I was not sure what to expect from this "professional experience," but I was happy to have a pay-check and a life outside of a fraternity house. As I matured into this new job of telefunds, mail appeals, events, meetings, and

planning, I grew to appreciate the academic world for its true worth: the noble callings of teaching and research. To me, an outsider, a professional in this bastion of that which is sacred, the service component of the faculty member life seemed secondary to committee meetings and "going to the library" on Friday afternoon. After only a year in institutional advancement, I knew the realm of my personal and professional lives: the college campus.

On the college green, few administrative tasks or positions are openly accepted and respected. Perhaps only the department chair or dean of an academic unit are truly respected by faculty. Among the faculty there is a collective unity which supersedes any and all disciplinary boundaries. I assume that faculty from particular areas may bond more tightly than the general university, but there is something shared, something common about faculty, especially when it is an issue of "we" faculty and "you" administration.

I honestly believe that my initial consideration of returning to graduate school was in pursuit of affiliation; a desire to be accepted as an insider on campus. Not until deep into doctoral study did I begin to understand what I had gotten myself into. Somewhere between Advanced Application of Analysis of Variance and Public Budgetary Behavior I realized the power, a calling almost, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, cloaked in the vernacular "research."

What I expected from graduate school was really quite simple, or at least I thought. I expected to be treated like an adult student, responsible largely for my own learning but guided, as Mentor guided Telemakhos (see Daloz, 1983). I expected to be cared for by fellow students and teachers, as I would care for them. I pictured nights at the library with groups of colleagues, thoughtful discussions in coffee-houses, and a support system that would help me through Kolstoe's (1975) wonderland.

I also expected my graduate experience to awaken me to a world of knowledge; a world of theories and constructs, postulates and hypotheses; a world of books and journals that would challenge my very belief in myself. I wanted twelve hours of the "Big Picture."

These were expectations of social and cognitive value to me. The temptation was strong enough to desert my good-paying job, sacrifice vacations, a new car, and a suit-and-tie work-a-day world. On my last day at work, amidst a good-bye party replete with balloons, wine, and good-luck gifts, a co-worker approached me, hugged me, and told me of a friend of hers who had committed suicide during her graduate program. I should have listened more carefully.

What We Got

The Good: Very few experiences can prepare an individual for the degradation and occasional humiliation which accompany the graduate school experience. But if we look beyond the pain of eye-strain, we can find a host of positive reinforcers which continue to lure the unsuspecting into what has become simply known as "graduate school."

> Even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. There will be good qualities that I can select for imitation and bad ones that will teach me what requires correction in myself.

First and foremost in our thoughts has been the friendships and collective sense of belonging which arises among graduate students. I have not read Jack London's White Fang for quite sometime, but I do seem to remember that wolves cling together in packs for security from the elements and to ward off potential enemies. In our estimation, graduate students exhibit the same "clinging" nature.

As groups of graduate students huddle against the fangs and claws of faculty, the bonding that takes place is really quite unique. I think we both can remember times when very informal "teams" or groups of graduate students would "storm" the library, finding articles and books for each other in an attempt to make the research process easier. Thoughts of proofreading each others papers and helping with presentations, and of course, blowing off steam on Friday afternoon, Saturday afternoon, Sunday

afternoon, and occasionally, Monday and Tuesday afternoon. were common and are now pleasant and refreshing memories.

The other area which really impacted both of us as "good" was in what we learned. The entire graduate school experience is often focused on work outside of the classroom, but it is what happens inside five-whatever room in old main or whichever building that makes the graduate experience truly unique. At no other time in your personal or professional career will it be seen as good, positive, and the "right thing to do" to diversify reading, research, and writing.

The above statement reflects our own experience of individuals with whom we have been associated as a graduate students. In every situation, an opportunity was created for learning to take place. We disregarded the negative and positive aspects of the relationships we encountered and focused more on the consequences of such relationships. Smothermon (1980) stated that our learning is in direct proportion to the number of teachers we have in our lives. This statement we believe to be true if you come from the perspective that we all have something to learn no matter where we are within our own experiences and relationships.

<u>The Bad:</u> There are several comments we both want to share with you this evening. Our initial thought was to share with you a few stories of what turned our experience into something which has a "dark side," if you will. Personally, I could recount several incidents involving scraping barnacles off of a boat,

raking a professor's private beach (five acres), mowing an in-laws lawn, teaching three class in addition to my assistantship--just to prove that I was a "team player with a can do attitude," writing grants without recognition, or worse, getting a million dollar grant that excludes any salary or compensation for ourselves, despite $10,000 in student loans. My good friend "Jack" at the bank, though, tells me that this "grant writing, funding, going to the bank for student loan application" cycle is common for the graduate student.

In reality what we both found to be "bad" about the graduate school experience was not so much the course work, or the requirement to think outside of our areas of true interest. What we found "bad" was the expectation that we somehow entered into an indentured-servant contract with an advisor. Matthew 7:15 states "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

We selected our advisors on reputation and kindness. I personally remember being bought a giant Danish and piping hot cup of coffee when I signed on with my advisor. Years later, I realize that this is the most pathetic of trickery. Beware, we advise you potential graduate students, of those advisors who seem kind and giving. For they may well show no mercy, take no prisoners, and truly GIVE you something. Something else to do, that is.

The Ugly: There are many aspects of the college experience, and these "aspects" become multi-dimensional the instant the "graduate school experience" is studied at any length. We are particularly aware of Dr. Wolper's World, the world of finely manicured campus greens, rich, ivy-covered Morrill halls, and of course in Nebraska, autumn afternoons either in Philly Hall, Zesto's, or Memorial Stadium, depending on whether or not Mom and Dad had extra tickets.

Unfortunately, Professor X's This Beats Working for a Living should have been a tell-tale sign, forecasting what we were in for. The dream world of "Mother Was A Freshman" turned, dramatically, into something resembling Dante's motivation and vision of seven stages. Dante referred to the doctoral matriculation as seven stages of hell--we think he was actually envisioning the graduate school application, evening classes, stats, the prospectus meeting, pre-lims, the dissertation, and doctoral advising. Dante masked these morbid exercises in graduate faculty indoctrination in the names of pestilence, purgatory, and hell.

The fires of graduate advising are perhaps best recanted by Margaret M. Stevens who told of the following story in her Prosperity is God's Idea:

> There was a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed man came to him and said, "you may have anything you choose-any food-any pleasure-any kind of entertainment."

> The man was delighted, and for days he sampled all the delicacies and experiences of which he had dreamed on earth. But one day he grew bored with all of it, and calling the attendant to him, he said, "I'm tired of all this. I need something to do. What kind of work can you give me?"
>
> The attendant sadly shook his head and replied, "I'm sorry, sir. That's the one thing we can't do for you. There is no work here for you."
>
> To which the man answered, "That's a fine thing. I might as well by in hell."
>
> The attendant said softly, "Where do you think you are?"

Recommendations for Potential Graduate Students and Graduate School Teachers

For Students

First, select a dissertation topic early in YOUR graduate career, and stick with it. Advisors, you will find, have a tendency to pursue personal research agendas through graduate student dissertation research. Beware the wolf! Make each class you take, each paper you write or presentation you give add some dimension to your dissertation. The dimension added might include references and concepts for your research design or theoretical framework, or hopefully, may add to your review of related research. Additionally, you may want to begin looking for references and citations for your dissertation the day you sign on with your advisor. As you will soon find, the journal you seek will be gone. Or the article torn out. Or the one volume you need, missing. Or lost in circulation. And so on.

To be aggressive and pure in your pursuit of knowledge, identify faculty in your department or program, or anywhere on campus, who subscribe to the particular journals you are interested in. We are not saying they will let you borrow them, but they may allow you to copy selected articles or read that which you seek. We may want to refer you, though, back to Matthew 7:15.

Second, network early in your graduate career. Seek out key faculty members who have a strong reputation on campus and nationally. Make an effort to attend national meetings, and let your campus contacts blossom into national contacts. From our experiences, it really is a question of "WHO" and not "WHAT" you know.

And third, publish, publish, publish. Different programs promote different aspects of graduate preparation, whether teaching, grant writing, service, etc. The only commonality to graduate programs is the respect for a publication record. If the graduate program is indeed to pay off with a stronger sense of career direction and self esteem, a publication record will help more than it will ever hurt.

For Graduate School Teachers

We can only reflect on our personal experiences as graduate students, of which, both we and our careers, were "perfect." Granted situations often went array and did not turn out like we planned them, but nevertheless, as Gloria Gainer sang not so long ago, we survived! We also learned and moved forward, personally,

and professionally.

To those of you here this evening who do, or will, teach graduate students, our advice can only be relayed through a personal note. The experience which continues to be my most satisfying relationship was developed with my adviser, mentor, and friend, surprisingly in this realm of academe, they were all the same person. This person exemplified the criteria of leadership which was described by Ron Edwards as the "Ten Commandments of Leadership".

> Treat everyone with respect and dignity.
> Set the example for others to follow.
> Be an active coach.
> Maintain the highest standards of honesty and integrity.
> Insist on excellence and hold your people accountable.
> Build group cohesiveness and pride.
> Show confidence in your people.
> Maintain a strong sense of urgency.
> Be available and visible to your staff.
> Develop yourself to your highest potential.

My adviser followed and lived according these ten commandments. My personal Dr. Wolper decided and chose to live by these principles. There is a huge difference between decision and choice and if you do not know that they are separate terms, you soon will, at least within the 8 x 12 graduate cell your program can become. Yes, one of us was fortunate to have such a person as a mentor and friend. The example has been put before me. I can only hope to follow that example, in the relationships I have and will develop in Kolstoe's wonderland.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this evening, we hope that what we have said and joked about does not cause you any great nightmares. What we do hope, however, is that you will proceed with caution on the campus green tomorrow, and that you will recognize this beautiful and remorseful situation for what it is: an opportunity for growth and knowledge, and in that opportunity we must frame our own minds and practices along the concepts of enlightenment, encouragement, and learning for your own sake, not that of others.

To close quickly, we must remind you of the one over-riding, all powerful rule in the social sciences. This rule has become even more powerful as the legislature plans budgets and the Clinton administration prepares a plan of action. The rule, as Dr. Harry Wolper reminds us, has the strength to empower and revitalize entire communities of grey-haired scholars. The rule, something to post on your door, has no postulates or tangents, and unfortunately, no accepted theoretical framework to draw upon. The rule is this: "THOSE WITH THE GOLD, MAKE THE RULES."

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